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# Metrical Transition and Resolution in the Music of Blindside

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By

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Abstract

Meter in rock cannot always be determined by the backbeat. I have adapted metrical analysis models developed by Harald Krebs and others to the music of the rock band Blindside to address the issue of identifying logical metrical schemes in a particular repertoire of rock music. Blindside's use of metrical dissonance necessitates expansion of the existing analytical models in that the meter in some of their songs is ambiguous at times, allowing for a period of transition from one metrical scheme to another. The ambiguity of the meter in songs such as "The Endings," combined with the message of the lyrics, creates a need for resolution, which resolution can be found with an examination of the song's form.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
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**Introduction**

As Carl Schachter states in the beginning of his groundbreaking article on meter, "meter is a problem."[1] Though he is referring to a lack of consensus among scholars in the field of metrical analysis of Western art music, I suggest that meter is a prevalent problem in the analysis of rock music. One specific difficulty with accounts of meter in rock is its long history of being understood according to the drum-based backbeat. John Covach has claimed that a rhythm section comprised of bass and drums provides rock listeners with their metric orientation.[2]

This approach can cause interpretive problems for the listener if other elements of the music, such as harmony, have contradictory metric implications. In his discussion of rhythm and meter in the music of the rock band Cream, Dave Headlam observes:

> Discussions of rhythm in rock music in relation to riffs, forms and other levels of durations and proportions are often hampered by a confusion between rhythm and meter and how these arise from the grouping structures of harmonies, melodies, bass notes, phrasing, and other musical features.[3]

In some rock songs, several of the musical elements listed by Headlam must be combined to effectively determine the meter.

Recent research has illustrated how pop and rock genres can have rhythmic and metric complexities that require the extension of existing analytical models. Mark Butler, for instance, used Harald Krebs's models of metrical dissonance in his analysis of electronic dance music, showing how some examples of this music lack metric specificities required to fully fit into

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[1] Carl Schachter, "Rhythm and Linear Analysis: Aspects of Meter," *The Music Forum* 6 (1987): 1.

[2] John Covach, "Progressive Rock, 'Close to the Edge,' and the Boundaries of Style," in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, ed. John Covach and Graeme Boone (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

[3] Dave Headlam, "Blues Transformations in the Music of Cream," in *Understanding Rock*, 87.

existing models, such as that of Krebs.[4] Jonathan Pieslak extensively analyzed the music of the metal band Meshuggah, wherein he explored meter beyond the surface level, using Maury Yeston's attack-point model.[5] In this paper, I will examine the music of the rock band Blindside and their use of metrical transitions, with the intention of illuminating yet another perspective music from a popular genre such as rock can provide to the existing concepts of metrical consonance and dissonance. I will also propose studies that could extend my own concepts of metrical analysis.

The band Blindside formed in 1994 in Stockholm, Sweden. They are sometimes broadly categorized as a rock band, though a more accurate classification might be that their style represents some variety of hardcore (post-hardcore, Christian hardcore). With regard to meter, Blindside's music is atypical of their genre. Bands from hardcore genres are not particularly known to use complex metric devices. Most of the music of post-hardcore bands, including P.O.D., one of Blindside's most influential mentors, uses conventional duple-meter, with occasional use of triple-meter or syncopation. Blindside's music, by contrast, contains odd meters, changing time signatures, and advanced metric techniques, such as metrical dissonance. In this paper, I will apply rhythmic and metrical dissonance models developed by Maury Yeston, Harald Krebs, and David Temperley, as well as terms derived from the work of Carl Schachter, to a few of Blindside's songs. In addition to identifying possible aesthetic purposes for the existence of metrical dissonance within the songs, the study of these Blindside songs will posit extensions of the existing analytical models mentioned.

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[4] Mark Butler, "Turning the Beat Around: Reinterpretation, Metrical Dissonance, and Asymmetry in Electronic Dance Music," *Music Theory Online* 7.6 (2001). http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.6/mto.01.7.6.butler.html (accessed November 22, 2011).

[5] Jonathan Pieslak, "Re-casting Metal: Rhythm and Meter in the Music of Meshuggah," *Music Theory Spectrum* 29, no. 2 (2007): 227.

Since I will be using terms specific to Krebs's work, preliminary definitions are in order.[6] His concepts of metrical consonance and dissonance are derived from the terms "rhythmic consonance" and "rhythmic dissonance" used by Yeston and earlier scholars.[7] Krebs prefaces his discussion of consonance and dissonance by outlining necessary conditions for the existence of meter. Meter only exists in the presence of a pulse level (regularly occurring pulses that determine the fastest level of rhythm) and one or more interpretive levels (slower levels that are regularly occurring subdivisions of the pulse level). Each interpretive level has a cardinality (the number of pulse-level pulses between occurrences), depicted in analyses by a numeric figure and -level (2-level for a cardinality of 2, etc.). Metrical consonance is constituted of a pulse level and one or more interpretive levels that group pulses from the pulse level without conflict among interpretive levels. Metrical dissonance occurs in two ways. Grouping dissonance occurs when two or more interpretive levels are present whose cardinalities are different and are not multiples (e.g. 2-level and 3-level). Displacement dissonance occurs when two interpretive levels of the same cardinality are simultaneously present but not aligned.[8]

Krebs also distinguishes between direct and indirect metrical dissonance. Direct dissonance occurs when conflicting levels are heard. Indirect dissonance happens when a level ceases to be heard but continues in the listener's mind and eventually collides with the onset of a new and conflicting level.[9] Both types will be considered in my analysis, but indirect dissonance will prove especially useful.

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[6] Harald Krebs, "Some Extensions of the Concepts of Metrical Consonance and Dissonance," *Journal of Music Theory* 31, no. 1 (1987): 101, 103.
[7] Maury Yeston, *The Stratification of Musical Rhythm* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 78.
[8] Harald Krebs, "Robert Schumann's Metrical Revisions," *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, no. 1 (1997): 37.
[9] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 103.

David Temperley offers a hypermetric perspective on pieces that contain multiple levels of meter. He even concludes his paper by suggesting that hypermetrical transitions could be a useful tool in the analysis of popular music.[10] His discussion on hypermetrical transitions focuses on the gradual shift from emphasis on "odd-strong" measures to "even-strong" measures and vice-versa. He claims that these transitions occur gradually in music but are not necessarily perceived as gradual. He further addresses the issue of perception with vantage-point analyses, which leads him to a more general discussion of perception. Herein he argues that a perceived hypermetric structure is contingent on the listener's prior knowledge of the piece. He claims:

> In our initial hearing… we are not aware of the subsequent context; hearing that context may cause us to revise our initial analysis of the measure. But if we were already familiar with the piece, we would essentially be hearing each measure from the vantage point of knowing the entire piece; thus there would never be any reason for "revision" effects.[11]

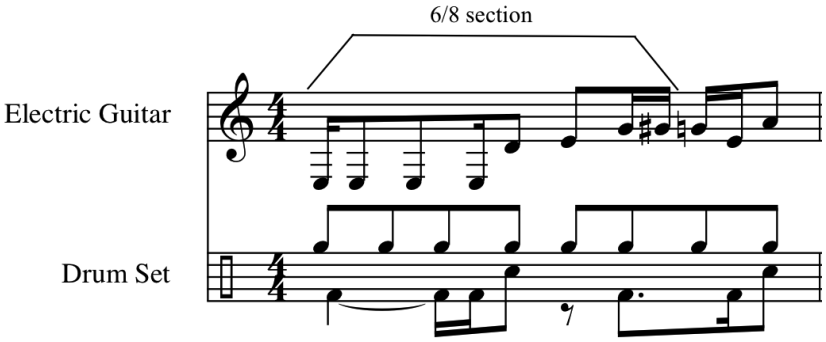
His discussion of vantage-point analysis specifically applies to the last of the Blindside songs analyzed in this paper.

**Analysis 1**

Many of Blindside's songs exemplify both types of metrical dissonance, but there appear to be far more instances of indirect metrical dissonance. A brief examination of one of their early songs will illuminate a unique instance of indirect metrical dissonance in their music. The first gesture of the opening guitar riff of "Superman" (shown in Example 1), from Blindside's self-produced and self-titled debut album, contains frequent metric shifts that contribute to its complexity. It is in 4/4 time, though it strongly hints at 6/8. The 6/8 feel of this guitar riff is confirmed by the backbeat in the drums, which is essentially a 6/8 figure extended by two eighth

[10] David Temperley, "Hypermetrical Transitions," *Music Theory Spectrum* 30, no. 2 (2008): 323.
[11] Temperley, 314.

notes.[12] The immediate repeat of the gesture is shortened to a true 6/8 length. The entire riff is then repeated, with the addition of feedback on the guitar for a quarter-note duration.




Example 1. Opening Riff of "Superman"

"Superman" presents a special case of indirect metrical dissonance in that the meter is already unstable as a result of its constant shifts; therefore, the meter of the pre-chorus section, stably in 4/4, creates indirect metrical dissonance based on the strong presence of 6/8 during the verse. This dissonance is not entirely unprepared though. Because of the shifts between 4/4 and 6/8, both meters are possibilities, so the steady 4/4 does not arrive with as much of a collision as it would if the verse were clearly in 6/8. The jolting meter suggests constant starting and stopping, or, more specifically to the lyrical meaning of the song, attempting and failing. Also, during the chorus, the speaker's expression of self-frustration through the words "I wish that I could stop playing Superman" implies that the speaker has realized the problem; the firm 6/8 meter throughout the chorus supports this new state of stability.

"Superman" is not the only case where Blindside's music pushes the boundaries of metrical dissonance through proceeding from one meter to another. Krebs continues his discussion of this topic by introducing metrical successions: these occur when consonances and

[12] This 6/8 drum backbeat also appears in other Blindside songs such as "Daughter," "My Mother's Only Son," and "Eye of the Storm."

dissonances are juxtaposed in various combinations.[13] He offers individual examples of consonance-consonance, consonance-dissonance, dissonance-dissonance, and dissonance-consonance successions, respectively. In the remainder of this paper I will examine Blindside songs that present possible extensions of Krebs's concept of metrical successions.

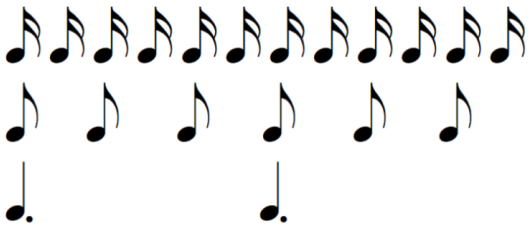
**Analysis 2**

My examination of indirect metrical dissonance in the music of Blindside has uncovered a couple of elements of metrical successions not discussed by other analysts. In considering the concept of an interpretive level continuing in the listener's mind after it ceases to be heard, it is important to note the rate of change of the listener's metric orientation from one interpretive level to the next. Krebs implies that these changes, or successions, occur immediately at the onset of the new interpretive level.[14] The following example illustrates that these successions are not necessarily immediate changes but can occur during a period of transition. These metrical transitions happen in a few different ways and will be discussed in the analyses that follow.

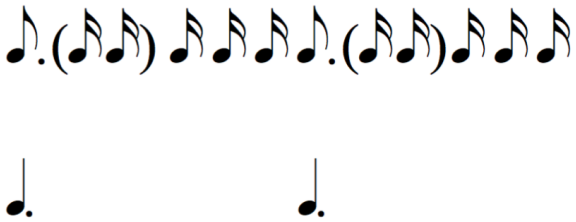
There are two types of consonance-dissonance succession; the most common of the two is when an interpretive level is added to a consonance and results in the creation of dissonance (the other type is not pertinent to my purposes and will not be discussed here).[15] One way a consonance-dissonance transition can occur is through a passage with an ambiguous meter. If the interpretive level that continues in the listener's mind previously subdivided a larger level that continues into the transition period, and the pulse level remains present but becomes broken up, implicitly entering on the locus of a new and conflicting interpretive level, the meter

[13] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 108.
[14] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 108.
[15] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 110.

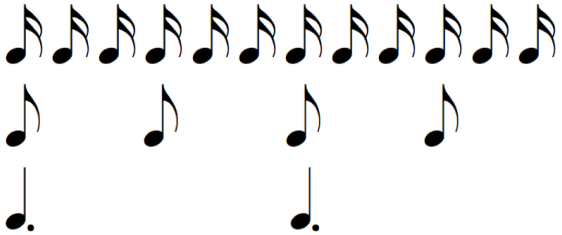
becomes ambiguous, with subtle implications of a new and conflicting interpretive level. The listener is thus exposed to two meters at once without as much of a collision as would be rendered by a stark change in interpretive levels. When the conflicting interpretive level is clearly heard, it is not a shock to the listener because the entrance(s) of the pulse level prepared it. Example 2a shows a consonance with two interpretive levels.



Example 2a. Initial Consonance



Example 2b. Intermediate level withdraws and pulse level breaks up

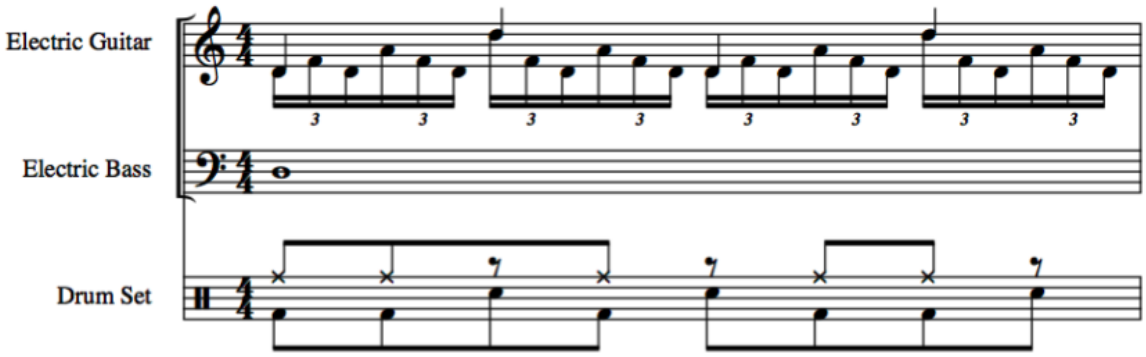


Example 2c. New intermediate interpretive level enters

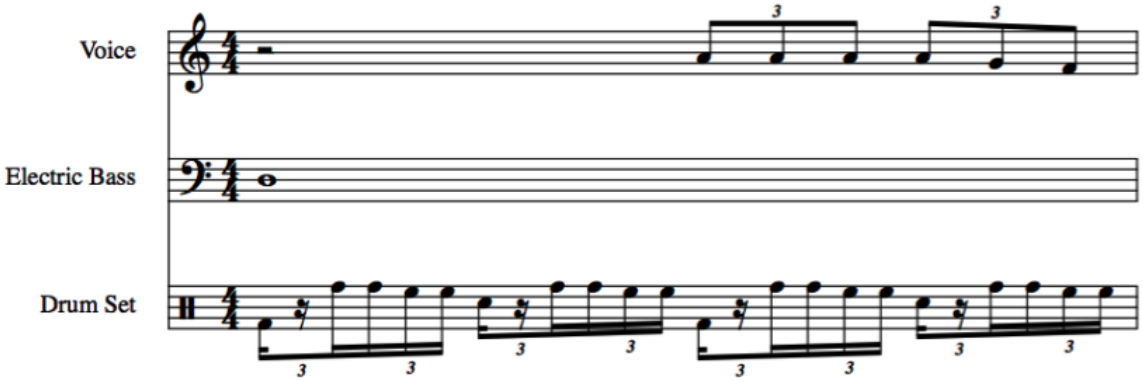
In example 2b, the intermediate interpretive level drops out. The pulse level becomes broken up but is continually reinforced by repeated entrances. The larger interpretive level remains and, because it evenly groups the non-sounding intermediate level, aids the listener's ability to continue to perceive that previous smaller interpretive level. Finally, as shown in example 2c, the new intermediate interpretive level enters and its frequency is dissonant with the

previous intermediate level, creating indirect metrical dissonance. An example from Blindside's repertoire will conclude this point.

In "After You're Gone," from *About a Burning Fire*, the consonance during the verse makes a transition to dissonance at the beginning of the pre-chorus section. In the verse, the pulse level is established by the triplet figures in the guitar riff together with the ghost notes on the snare drum. Example 3 shows that the first interpretive level (a 3-level) is established by the bass drum and the ride cymbal. The slower interpretive level, a 6-level, is heard primarily in the interplay between the accented D3 and D4 in the guitar riff.




Example 3. Consonance in verse of "After You're Gone"




Example 4. Pre-chorus of "After You're Gone"

In example 4, at the conclusion of the verse (the onset of the pre-chorus), the 3-level ceases and the pulse level is transferred from the guitar and snare ghost notes to a roll on the toms, the bass drum, and the snare, with the second pulse omitted. The entrances of the pulse level imply a 2-level, but it is never fully realized until the vocal melody enters in the second half of the first measure of the pre-chorus. This melody creates, or perhaps confirms, the dissonance, leaving a half-measure of transition between the consonance and the dissonance. The words "What if you'd sing me alive" in the pre-chorus melody imply a transformation from the desperate cry "It's taking me down" immediately preceding them in the verse; the presence of the consonance-dissonance metrical transition reinforces this transformation.

**Analysis 3**

The final song I discuss is Blindside's "The Endings," from their third album, *Silence*. I offer a brief analysis to provide my perspective of the song's metric devices before proceeding to use the models and tools of the scholars mentioned previously.

When I listen to "The Endings," I hear two possible placements of a steady 4/4-meter, offset from each other by one beat. Each potential interpretation has more than one factor supporting it as "the" meter (to borrow again from Carl Schachter).[16] Schachter asserts that such metrical schemata as that of "The Endings" do not necessarily mandate one definitive conclusion as to which of the two possibilities constitutes "the" meter. He vies that one could be just as important as the other.[17] A brief overview of each of the two metric interpretations, with their supporting factors, will validate this point.

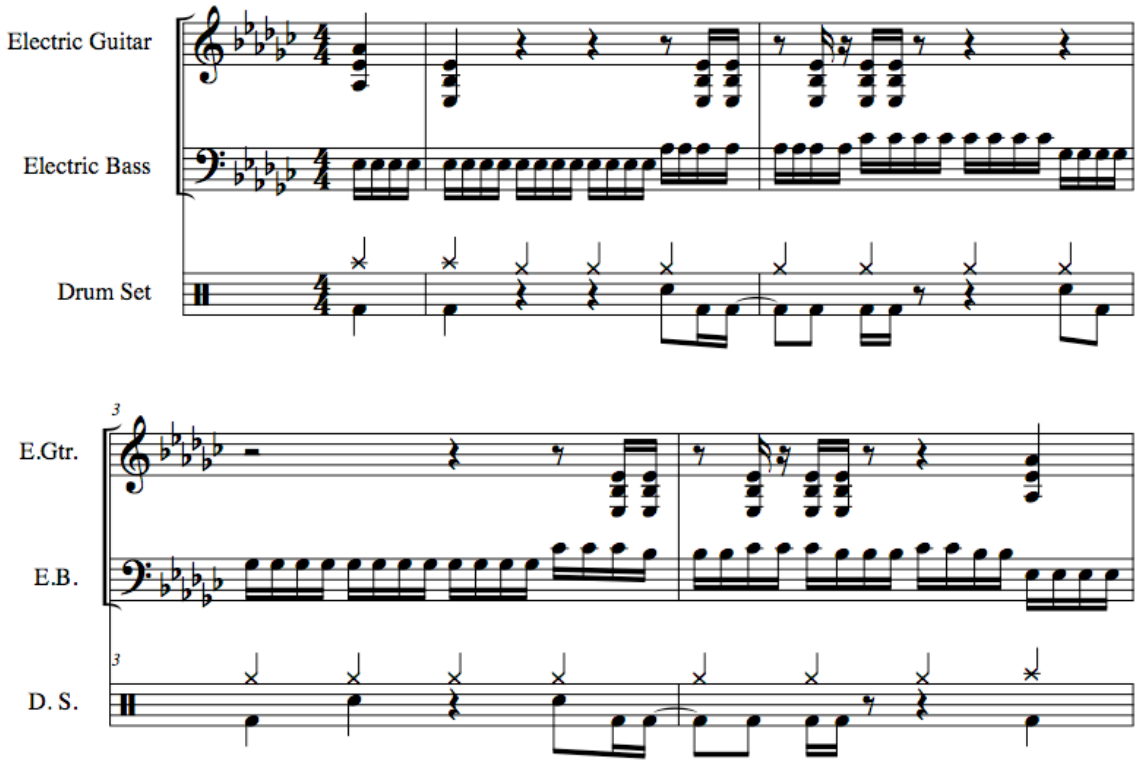
[16] Schachter, 29.
[17] Schachter, 30.

One metric interpretation of the opening verse of "The Endings" places the downbeat on the first chord; the other interpretation places it on the second chord, treating the first chord as a pickup (respectively the first and second interpretations hereafter). The factors that support the first interpretation include the harmony and the onset of the second verse. The bass line offers the primary harmonic motion during the opening verse. The bass moves to a new pitch at the onset of each measure, with some of those pitches lasting for half of a measure, placing the harmonic changes at measures conducive to this first interpretation. The second verse is musically identical to the first, and its significance lies in its metric placement. The chorus is clearly in 4/4, and the start of the second verse begins at the next beat after the conclusion of the chorus, and thus does not interrupt the metric flow established by the chorus. This metric continuity makes it sound as though the first interpretation is a valid account of the meter. This interpretation is shown in example 5.


Example 5. First four measures of "The Endings" according to the first metric interpretation

Conversely, there are elements that strongly support the second metric interpretation. Under this interpretation, the crash cymbal accents are placed at typical metric points. According to the first interpretation, these accents would happen on the first and second beats of the measure, which is not very common in rock songs. It is much more common to begin a drum fill a few beats prior to the next downbeat and end the fill on the downbeat with a crash cymbal accent. These accents validate this interpretation; however, there are yet more significant factors that support it. This interpretation is shown in example 6.

The two factors that provide the most substantial evidence for establishing the second interpretation as the more valid of the two come forth in the transitional passage that the links the verse to the pre-chorus and the traditional backbeat elements during the




Example 6. First four measures according to the second metric interpretation

verse. The transitional material is significant because its completion marks exactly 16 measures when counted from the onset of the second chord, providing a more typical metric pattern than that of the first interpretation. The backbeat elements provide an interesting topic of discussion at this point and will allow the introduction of this paper to come full-circle. One interesting thing about the backbeat is that, like the pulse levels in the transitions of the earlier examples, it is almost sporadic in nature, and is thus presented implicitly. A traditional backbeat in 4/4 time usually consists of a steady pulse of eighth-notes on the hi-hat or ride cymbals, with alternation between bass drum and snare on the beats, starting with the bass drum on the downbeat. In this metric interpretation of the opening verse of "The Endings," a backbeat is present in every third measure for the first fifteen measures, as well as in the eighth measure. In addition, a snare hit alludes to a backbeat in every other measure beginning with the second measure. Because a clear backbeat is characteristic of rock and is present in most of Blindside's music, it seems clear that the second metric interpretation is the intended one.

Some of the models I have used are all but sufficient to explain what is happening metrically in "The Endings." The two interpretations explained above seem to make it a clear example of Krebs's concept of displacement dissonance. One important note about Krebs's examples of displacement dissonance is that they seem to focus on a hierarchy among interpretive levels. He observes: "It is noteworthy that in both type A [grouping] and type B [displacement] dissonances, the two conflicting levels are rarely heard as being equal in significance; one of the levels is usually heard as being primary, the other or others as secondary."[18] Like Krebs's model, Carl Schachter's concept of syncopated time spans, which he describes as "a time span syncopated within a larger time span" also relies on the presence of an

[18] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 105.

audible hierarchy of levels.[19] The issue with "The Endings" not addressed in the models formed by Krebs and Schachter is that there is no apparent hierarchy of interpretive levels or time spans during the verse; each of the two metric interpretations sounds equally important, and each has characteristics to support its position.

To draw a conclusion as to which of the two is the more significant interpretive level, I have looked to both David Temperley's discussion on hypermetrical transitions and the form of the song. Temperley shows how hypermeter can gradually shift from an "even-strong" to an "odd-strong" metrical scheme. The commonality that the metrical transition in "The Endings" shares with the hypermetrical transition model discussed by Temperley is that the meter in "The Endings" can certainly be understood as beginning with one point of orientation and ending with a different one. The difference is that the two layers of meter are vying for determinability of the listener's metric orientation rather than for the listener's hypermetric orientation. I have applied Temperley's model of vantage-point analysis to "The Endings." Example 7 shows one possibility of a perceived metrical scheme.[20]

| | V1 | P1 | C1 | V2 | P2 | C2 | B | C3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V1 | 1 | | | | | | | |
| P1 | 2 | 2 | | | | | | |
| C1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| V2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | | | |
| P2 | ? | ? | ? | ? | ? | | | |
| C2 | ? | ? | ? | ? | ? | ? | | |
| B | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| C3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Example 7. Vantage-point analysis of "The Endings"

[19] Schachter, 23.
[20] Temperley, 313.

In example 7, the various sections of "The Endings" are represented with V (verse), P (pre-chorus), C (chorus), and B (bridge). The columns show the flow of the song sections, while the rows show the sections containing the vantage point at which the listener revises metric orientation. The numbers 1 and 2 respectively represent the first and second metric interpretations. The question marks represent ambiguity or lack of certainty as to metric orientation.

Example 7 shows that one could perceive the first interpretation as the intended meter, revising that perception to become the second interpretation at the onset of the pre-chorus. This interpretation would continue until the onset of the second pre-chorus, where it is no longer valid to treat the first beat of the verse section as a pickup because of its continuity with the preceding chorus. This could render the meter ambiguous. My examination of the form of the song has revealed how this ambiguity could be resolved.

Two measures into the bridge material after the second chorus, the B chord enters on beat one (when viewed hypermetrically according to the first metric interpretation). This is essentially the same chord that entered on a weak beat in the first pre-chorus section, and its presence seems to conclusively establish the first metric interpretation as the one of greater significance. The graph shows that the potential "revision effect" caused by the presence of this chord could reach all the way back to the beginning, revealing to the listener the true metrical scheme that had always existed.

Krebs uses an analogy with harmony to discuss the resolution of metrical dissonances. He suggests, "The term 'resolution' can more appropriately be applied when a metrical dissonance is succeeded by a consonant collection of levels. A state of coincidence of attacks

following on of non-coincidence certainly gives the aural impression of resolution."[21] To take his analogy even further, I suggest that these resolutions, as in the harmony domain, can be delayed. In addition to resolving the hierarchical ambiguity present because of the two metric interpretations, the B chord in the bridge perhaps musically resolves the lingering conflict from the unanswered "What if" questions in the chorus of "The Endings." Similar conclusions can be made about the bridge section in "After You're Gone," which I have analyzed earlier in this paper. It also leaves a "What if" question unanswered in the lyrics but alludes to a resolution in the music. The ride cymbal in the bridge establishes a 3-level, which remains through the following chorus, implying that, if a hierarchy exists, the 3-level is more significant than the 2-level that was previously prominent in the pre-chorus.

**Conclusion**

I have attempted herein to illustrate how Blindside's music exemplifies the necessity for extended analytical models in order to effectively analyze and explain meter in some of the music of popular styles. I say "styles" based on the fact that this analysis is certainly not limited to Blindside's genre (especially because they are a rarity among the bands of their genre with regard to meter). The analytical techniques I have discussed can be applied to other genres and perhaps expounded upon. For instance, one of the most appealing characteristics of some rock genres, such as progressive, is the intentional use of complex metrical devices. It might be useful to examine the frequency of metrical transitions and delayed metrical resolutions in progressive rock, as it may provide a ready explanation for many of the metrical devices used; it could also offer some suggestions regarding form in progressive rock, which, at times, seems to

[21] Krebs, "Some Extensions," 114.

be free of form. Furthermore, my discussion of metrical dissonance could be combined with hypermeter to discuss the existence of dissonance at the hypermetrical level in rock contexts.

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